

# Introduction - What is the Prophetic Imperative

The term the “prophetic imperative” in our UU tradition goes back to the 1977 dissertation by Unitarian Universalist minister Richard Gilbert titled, *The Prophetic Imperative: Unitarian Universalist Foundations for a New Social Gospel*.

Given the social, political, economic, health, racial, and environmental challenges that exist today, the prophetic imperative has taken on increased importance.

“Prophetic” refers to the tradition of the Hebrew prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Amos, and Micah. According to Erich Fromm, “The prophets believed that the meaning of life is the struggle for justice in community.” Gilbert notes that the word “prophet” originally applied to individuals, but his intent has been to apply it to congregations. Gilbert took the word “imperative” from the book *The Radical Imperative* by John Bennett, noting that the word, for him, involved “a sense of urgency to live out the ethical implications of religious faith.”

Gilbert’s purpose was to encourage Unitarian Universalists to construct a new Social Gospel in which social responsibility is intrinsically related to the religious quest and the work of a congregation.

Another key figure was John Haynes Holmes, a Unitarian minister, who led the Community Church of New York in 1919. Holmes was not only prophetic in word, but also prophetic in action. He helped found the NAACP and the ACLU.

Relative to a new Social Gospel, Gilbert contended, “The Unitarian Universalist Church lives under a ‘prophetic imperative,’ for the church to address the systemic problems of the communities in which it lives.”

His perspective was amplified through the adoption of the Unitarian Universalist Principles and Sources in 1985. The second source draws from the “words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love.” This source

- ◆ Calls us out of ourselves and into the world;
- ◆ Calls for words, which is to say, public witness, and deeds that involve concrete actions in service of justice;

♦ Articulates in a profoundly compact manner a theology of evil; and calls, not for “faith, hope and love” as elegantly summarized in Paul’s letter to the Corinthians, but for justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love.

The term prophet has traditionally referred to an individual. James Luther Adams, the most theologically influential individual in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Unitarian Universalism, argued for a broader and more powerful understanding of the prophetic role in his 1947 essay, *The Prophethood of All Believers*.

Adams, a theologian, social ethicist, and professor, wrote, "We see the prophet as one who stands at the edge of a community's experience and tradition, ...viewing human life from a piercing perspective and bringing an imperative sense of the perennial and inescapable struggle of good against evil, of justice against injustice." Adams continued, "...the prophet shakes us out of our pride and calls for a change of heart and mind and action. With fear and trembling the prophet announces crisis and demands ethical decision here and now."

For Gilbert and Adams, the role of a prophet of foretelling and **forthtelling** is not limited in a prophetic liberal church to a chosen few. It is the collective responsibility of members to discern "where to" and "why" and "how." This commitment gave rise to Adams' call for a church to be a Prophethood of All Believers. When this happens, new ways of being and acting emerge.

Our tradition draws from many sources including, "Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love." Let us become those women and men.

Perhaps one of the simplest summaries of the Prophetic Imperative I have seen is the quote by Paula Cole Jones in today's Readings from the common bowl - "The prophetic church presents a vision that compels us to act."

## Reading 2 -

Without a prophetic imperative, it is not clear that there would be sufficient motivation to repair the world. We are blessed, therefore, that so many people, motivated by a prophetic imperative, work tirelessly to bend the moral arc of the universe toward justice. Sometimes progress is not especially visible, since the work is grounded in the grassroots, but it makes a difference. Consider racial justice, climate justice, electoral justice, reproductive justice, and more. And, not trivially, it is often darkest before the dawn. Let us join the prophetic women and men of ages past by courageously confronting, as they did, the powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love.